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BRAC needs worry officials

Localities lack federal help for schools, roads and utilities

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WASHINGTON - When President Bush breaks ground today for a new Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Maryland, Phil Alperson may be thinking about how Route 355 is going to handle the thousands of additional staff, patients and visitors the hospital is expected to draw each day.

"You cannot increase the personnel ... by one-third, or double the hospital load to nearly 1 million visits to the campus each year, without having a significant impact on traffic and congestion outside the fence," said Alperson, an aide to Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett. "If a doctor or emergency vehicle can't access the campus in a timely manner because they are mired in gridlock, then we will have let down the very people this mission is supposed to serve."

The National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, where the new Walter Reed is to be built, is one of several military installations in the state set to grow in the nationwide base realignment and closure process known as BRAC. But with a 2011 deadline to complete the moves, local and state officials say, the federal government has not provided enough support to communities around the new Walter Reed, Aberdeen Proving Ground in Harford County and Fort Meade in Anne Arundel County. The 28,000 new families they are expected to bring will need roads, utilities and schools.

"What is happening with BRAC in terms of its impact on local communities is that we have an unfunded federal mandate," said Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski. "The Bush administration's budget requests are both spartan and skimpy."

Maryland officials lobbied for the base expansions, which are projected to bring 60,000 jobs and pump billions of dollars into the state economy. But now, some say, budget battles in Washington and bureaucracy at the Pentagon are frustrating efforts to accommodate the rapid growth.

Mikulski said Bush is underfunding Impact Aid, the federal program that pays local school districts to educate children who live on military bases. Alperson, the Montgomery County BRAC coordinator, said the Pentagon should have planned for improvements to Route 355 and a nearby Metro station "long ago." Karen Holt, who represents seven counties in Maryland, Pennsylvania and Delaware affected by the expansion of the Aberdeen Proving Ground, said she can "hear that clock ticking."

"None of the projects can be done overnight," said Holt, regional BRAC manager for the Chesapeake Science and Security Corridor. "You talk about improvements of roads and intersections - we can't afford to wait until 2010. ... We're beyond that halfway point to when BRAC has to be fully implemented by law."

In a survey of 20 communities nationwide that the Defense Department expects to be "substantially and seriously impacted" by base expansions, more than half expressed concerns about the level of information they have received about the newcomers and their needs, the Government Accountability Office reported last month. The congressional watchdog concluded that "high-level leadership" is needed "to help communities address challenges caused by DoD-related growth."

Officials in Maryland, which placed Aberdeen, Fort Meade and Walter Reed in that Top 20, say getting information hasn't been much of a problem. The Office of Economic Adjustment, a Pentagon agency, has given the state millions of dollars to study the effects of BRAC.

"The challenges obviously come when planning has to translate into bricks and mortar," Holt said.

Last fall, the state identified 26 transportation projects totaling \$1.6 billion to help ease the flow of traffic around the growing installations, which also include Fort Detrick in Frederick and Andrews Air Force Base in Prince George's County. Most of the money is expected to come from the state.

Maryland's congressional delegation managed \$15.36 million in BRAC-related earmarks last year - money to buy more locomotives for the MARC commuter rail system, improve access to Aberdeen Proving Ground and develop a new transit center at Fort Meade. But with the odds of Congress completing the appropriations process during this election season growing slim, members may not get the chance at a similar haul until next year.

"Our two senators and congressional delegation are working very hard to get as much as possible as soon as possible," said J. Michael Hayes, the former Marine Corps general who serves as director of federal and military affairs for the state Department

of Business and Economic Development. "But the fact is that it's probably going to take longer than we would desire. We are looking at all kinds of interim solutions."

In Anne Arundel, for example, Bob Lieb calls the widening of Route 175 "the ultimate solution" to congestion around Fort Meade. The cost of the work has been estimated in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

"We know that isn't going to be done by the time the transition begins," said Leib, special assistant for BRAC to County Executive John R. Leopold. "So we've identified six intersections to improve that will help the flow of traffic in that interim time frame. And if there were additional federal funds made available, we could increase that to 22 intersections, easily. We could even increase that to 50."

Montgomery County, meanwhile, is asking the Pentagon to fund \$21 million in improvements to Route 355, also known as the Rockville Pike, and the Medical Center Metro station through its Defense Access Roads program. Democrats Mikulski, Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin and Rep. Chris Van Hollen have urged the Department of Defense to include the projects in the program, which ordinarily funds work around rural installations.

"We are trying to establish a precedent," said Van Hollen, whose district includes much of Montgomery County. "And obviously, they're somewhat cautious about creating new precedents. With respect to the whole BRAC process, the military's position generally is that they do not assume the costs of the local impact."

In this case, Alperson is hopeful. Walter Reed, he notes, is the jewel of the military medical system - as well as the focus of widespread criticism over the mistreatment of some Iraq war veterans.

"I'm optimistic that they're going to look favorably on" the request, the Montgomery County official said. "This is one BRAC they need to get right."

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